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High-Altitude U. S. Jet Maps Red Territory

by Norman Lindhurst
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BOMH—The U. S. Air Force is operating here in West Germany the world's highest-flying jet, the Lockheed U-2, on a mystery assignment.

One official quipped that the mission is "a sort of inadvertent preview of Washington's 'open skies' disarmament proposals." It is believed that the U-2 can reach an altitude of 65,000 feet, well beyond the ceiling of Soviet interceptors, even Russia's highly-touted new Farmer interceptor.

Officially classed as a "meteorological research" aircraft, the U-2 was developed by Lockheed for the Air Force for use in monitoring radioactive fallout from nuclear weapons tests, both American and Soviet.

Several Abroad

It has been used for this purpose in Nevada. Several months ago a number of U-2 jets were sent to England, and within recent weeks several of the same aircraft have begun operating from USAF bases in West Germany.

In West Germany the Air Force is believed to be using the U-2 primarily for the mapping of areas behind the Iron Curtain and to probe Russia's radar defenses.

Fitted with a revolutionary new aerial camera, the U-2 is said to be capable of photographing most of the Soviet satellites and large areas of the Soviet Union without technically violating Communist airspace.

Classified

The Air Force states that the aircraft and its mission are "classified."

One U-2 is reported to have crashed in East Germany, but neither the USAF nor Communist authorities will confirm or deny the report.

Air Force sources say the U-2 had been used with great success in monitoring fallout from the Nevada nuclear tests. "It is easily the world's highest-flying aircraft and, if the secret label were removed, it would better the international record by a margin which would surprise everybody," one informed source said.

The world's altitude mark is 63,668 feet, held by Britain with a specially modified Canberra.

The number of U-2 jets which have been constructed is classified information, but it is not believed to be large.

The Air Force, it was learned, has made several of these planes available to the U. S. National Advisory Committee for Aeronautics, and these aircraft actually are being used in meteorological research.

Despite its high operating ceiling, the U-2 is a relatively slow aircraft. Its Pratt and Whitney J-57 engine gives it a top speed of a little over 500 miles per hour.

Speed Not Needed

Experts explained, however, that the mystery plane has been designed for a single purpose—altitude. "At the altitude the U-2 flies there is no need for speed, because there will be no other planes up there to worry about," according to US Air Force spokesman.

Aside from the U-2, the U. S. Air Force has two crack aerial reconnaissance units which operate openly in West Germany, the 10th Tactical Reconnaissance Wing at Spangdahlem and the 66th at Sembach.

These units, equipped with standard reconnaissance aircraft, have a 50,000-foot operating ceiling, a fact which points up the immense value to the USAF of the U-2.